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Declaration of Independence: Mary Colum as Autobiographer

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Declaration of Independence: Mary Colum as Autobiographer

BY SANFORD STERNLICHT

IN 1947, ten years before her death at the age of 71, Mary Catherine Gunning Maguire Colum—Molly to her friends and her husband, the poet-dramatist Padraic Colum—published one of the most forthright and powerful protofeminist autobiographies of the twentieth century: *Life and the Dream*, a book that should not be as neglected as it is.¹ What was or is the dream? It was a dream of many episodes: the hope of a free, prosperous, peaceful, united Ireland; the fulfillment of the Irish Literary Revival which she so brilliantly chronicles as a participant-witness in the autobiography, and before in her masterwork of literary criticism: *From These Roots: Ideas That Made Modern Literature* (1937); and perhaps most of all a dream of equality for women in the male-dominated world of Anglo-Irish-American letters; for Colum never forgot that the Irish writer she admired most, really worshipped, her friend Yeats, had advised her not to follow a career in creative writing, her first love, but to pursue criticism, because “women were better at that” and a woman could never hope to succeed as a writer of fiction and verse.

Belletristic writing was Colum's first love, and Yeats, the God of the Irish Renaissance, had denied it to her. *Life and the Dream* (hereafter *LD*), so late in her life, was her counterattack, her rebellion, her Declaration of Independence. She states: “I think there is no superior race or superior sex; there are only superior or inferior individuals. While I believe a prejudice such as anti-Semitism is a communicable psychic disease like war incitements, and consequently could be stamped out if tackled properly as physical diseases are tackled, sex bias like color bias, is a habit based on the fact that the occupations of women, as of the colored races, have been too largely of the servile kind. Sex bias has existed everywhere, in every country, in every age, and among all races” (*LD*, 453–4).

1. Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1947).

Sanford Sternlicht is part-time professor of English at Syracuse University and Irish Studies series editor for Syracuse University Press. His most recent books are *Jean Rhys* (1997) and *A Reader's Guide to Modern Irish Drama* (1998).

Life and the Dream was Molly Colum's most enthusiastically received book. Writing in an age that had just begun to be interested in women's autobiography, Colum firmly established that her life was distinguishable from that of her husband or any male, father or lover. One might say that Colum was in at the beginning of "herstory." The book is actually a combination of autobiography, women's history, literary criticism, biography, sociology, and portraiture of leading Irish cultural figures. In a three-page rave review in the *New Yorker*, Edmund Wilson was greatly impressed by "an insight into people and societies at once so sympathetic and so shrewd, and so humane and reflective an outlook on so large a slice of the world."² Wilson believed Colum's autobiography to be the best chronicle of the Irish Literary Renaissance.

Eugene O'Neill called Colum "one of the few true critics of literature writing in English,"³ and William Rose Benét said, "Everyone of sapience knows that Mary M. Colum is the best woman critic in America. There is no one in her class. She occupies the same place here as Rebecca West in England."⁴ Colum practically created the field of comparative literature in the English-speaking world. She was a major chronicler of modernism. Colum was an essayist, a person of letters, a Virginia Woolf, an Edmund Wilson, an intellectual in the heady milieu of the New York Intellectuals. Her audience were the people who read the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and today would be the readers of the *New York Review of Books*.

And Colum was one tough woman. She had to be; as she makes clear in *Life and the Dream*, the literary establishments in Dublin, New York, and London were totally male dominated and at best condescending towards women writers. She battled male editors and critics, saying in *LD* that "though the warmest praise I have ever got . . . came from men, when it comes to real clawing, scratching, biting, the male of the species can be more ferocious than the female. It has a long history, this male objection to female intellectual pretension. . . . I never minded being hit if I were allowed to hit back, for having undertaken what had been considered a man's occupation, criticism, I had to learn how to be an expert fighter. I have a racial talent in that line, anyhow, and can use both the rapier and the bludgeon with fair skill, so that sometimes even a strong fighting male has expressed regret that he got into 'a muss with that woman'" (373-4).

2. Edmund Wilson, "The Memoirs of Mary Colum," *New Yorker*, 22 March 1947, 109.

3. Letter to *Forum Magazine* (December 1935): 5.

4. *Saturday Review of Literature* 10 (28 October 1933): 221.

Her friend Elinor Wylie, the poet, praised her strength: "She has not the middle mind that purrs and never shows a tooth." Colum was a strong-minded Irish woman who from the beginning of her life identified with the female tradition in art and politics. In interpreting the aesthetic in literature, she placed a Marxist-like emphasis on objective external functions such as equality for women and mass appeal, for Colum believed that universal appeal was the true indication of a great writer.

One of the foregrounded themes in *LD* is Mary Colum's dedication and commitment to sisterhood. These traits commenced with her early formal education, although the psychological basis for them was the loss of her mother at age ten; as frequently indicated in *LD*, she was brought up by men. Only a grandmother, a caring but cold and unwell woman, provided any kind of a female model for the intellectually precocious child.

Mary Catherine Gunning Maguire was born in 1884 in Collooney, Co. Sligo, of middle-class Roman Catholic parents. Padraic came from a Longford family of peasant Roman Catholics. Molly was sent to the boarding school of the Convent of St. Louis in Monaghan. She was an outstanding student, especially in languages and literature, and so she was soon sent to a women's school in Heidelberg to study German language and literature. The school had many aristocratic German students who all hoped to marry army officers and live as the wives of staff officers and diplomats. There were American students too, and Colum points out that none of the German young women achieved her goal; but one beautiful American indeed became the wife of the ambassador to the Court of St. James. Her name was Rose Fitzgerald, later Rose Kennedy.

Molly then entered the National University as well prepared as any student. There she met many major figures of the Irish Revival and was caught up in the movement. She was head of one of the school's literary societies and she decided on a writer's life. Her degree was in modern languages, the same as Joyce's earlier. She took a teaching job at St. Enda's under Padraic Pearse. Now she met Thomas MacDonagh, who also taught there, and Padraic Colum, who was developing his writing career. Along with David Houston and James Stephens they founded the *Irish Review*.

The *Review* (1911-14) was literary and political, but for Molly "politics" had more to do with how she was treated by men than with how her country was treated by others. At the *Irish Review* Molly began to know what Julia Kristeva calls a woman's "Black Sun," lightness and the dark coming simultaneously with freedom and oppression. Padraic remem-

bered Molly as the *Review's* "critic-in-chief."⁵ Molly remembered differently: "I was the only woman in the group, and . . . I was well bossed and patronized by them. They were determined to write the body of the magazine themselves—poetry, the stories, the plays, the articles, and the editorial notes. But they decided to let me do some book reviewing in the back pages in small type" (*LD*, 158). Also, she was the only one able to type, which may have been her big mistake. But prior to this, Colum had written stories and articles for the *English Review* and the *London Nation*. Yeats, however, had advised her to pursue a career in criticism and to adopt a man's name because "men still regarded criticism and philosophy as their own province, and would be sure to resent a woman's pushing in" (*LD*, 372). This time she ignored him.

The final squash came in the form of the power of the cultural imperative. Molly was a very lovely young woman with a cascade of beautiful red hair. Her intelligence, energy, talent, and beauty provoked several proposals. One aggressive, perhaps brutally aggressive, suitor was MacDonagh. As the expression goes, he wouldn't take no for an answer. Molly recalled: "I did not have any taste for exchanging the independent and interesting life I was living for puttering around a kitchen, planning meals, hanging curtains, and so on, and I let my young friends know my sentiments about this. One of them, however, declined to listen to me and kept assuring me that he was the person Heaven had destined me to marry and I could not escape my fate." Molly continued to refuse him politely. "But he made one final determined effort before dropping me. He called at my little flat, armed with an engagement ring, and told me in a very cave-man manner that he had arranged everything, that I was to marry him on a certain date in a certain church, and that I had better accept my destiny." Needless to say, Molly was frightened and intimidated. "The argument that ensued reduced me to a state of panic such as I had never known, for I was afraid I might be unable to hold out, especially as he said I had encouraged him and ought to have some sense of responsibility about it. But I managed to be strong-minded, and the harassing interview ended with tears on both sides, with his throwing the ring into the fire and leaving in a high state of emotion" (*LD*, 175).

Enter the hero to the rescue, although it is a dubious rescue as usual, for the woman still is carried off. Molly continues: "I was stretched out in a condition of copious weeping when, some minutes later . . . Padraic Colum called. Tearfully, I told him of my ordeal; the ring was still lying

5. "Thomas MacDonagh and His Poetry," *Dublin Magazine* 5 (spring 1966): 39–45.



Mary Column, ca. 1904. Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, Binghamton University, State University of New York.

unconsumed in a corner of the grate; he fished it out with a tongs, left it on the hearthstone to cool so that it could be mailed back . . . then he settled himself gravely in an armchair and proceeded to lecture me. "I think," said he, "that to save yourself trouble, you should marry me. Then these fellows will all leave you alone and you won't have to go through any more of these scenes." He pursued this train of reasoning, and eventually I dried my eyes and said, "All right, Colum; maybe that would be best" (*LD*, 175).

Because of a lack of money they were not married, however, until two and a half years later. Colum mentions her husband only occasionally in *LD*. There are no indications of great affection on her part. The above event, humorous and poignant, is interesting in that Colum is pointing out that she was trapped into marriage by the demands of the culture and the class in which she had been born and in which she lived. Although she never directly gives her age in *LD*, she was, in fact, over twenty-five at the time of the "proposals." Padraic proved very romantic about the marriage, if somewhat inept. Molly summed it up: "My husband was extremely unpractical, and I was ignorant of practical issues, though I was capable of learning more about them than he was" (*LD*, 184). Clearly, she was the dominant party in the relationship.

In *LD* Colum devotes much more ink to Van Wyck Brooks than to Padraic. She had an affair with Brooks in the early 1920s. Everyone seemed to know about it except Padraic. Brooks, also married, was beset with guilt, had a nervous breakdown, confessed, offered to leave his wife, and then instead broke off with Colum. She was enraged and did not speak to him for twenty years, although she continued to care for him. The relationship is not revealed in *LD*. Brooks and Colum only seem to be close professional friends, but the truth is really given away when two decades after their breakup, and after Brooks's wife had died, they were reconciled and met again. She wrote to tell him, "I am looking forward so much to seeing you but please don't ask the large rotund lady who opens the door for you, if you can see Mrs. Colum as another long absent friend did recently, for that large dame will be I."⁶ Padraic wrote many beautiful love poems to Molly, and in his final collection, *Images of Departure* (1969), he sadly, almost bitterly, mourned her death.

In 1914, unable to make an adequate living as writers in Dublin, the Colums emigrated to the United States, eventually winding up in New

6. Colum to Brooks, 16 February, 1947, Van Wyck Brooks Papers, University of Pennsylvania.

York City, and Molly bloomed in New York. She wrote more than 160 articles and reviews for *Scribners*, *Dial*, *Forum*, *Freeman*, *Nation*, *New Republic*, *American Mercury*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Yale Review*, *Herald Tribune*, *New York Times Book Review*, etc. Colum thrived on controversy, and she battled men who objected to what they saw as female intellectual pretension. New York, not Dublin nor London, gave her the big chance as a critical writer and let her keep within a female tradition. In New York she penned her literary monuments: *From These Roots: The Ideas That Made Modern Literature* (1937), a landmark of comparative literature and a milestone in the then-developing question of what is modernism; and *Life and the Dream* (1947), undertaken at the urging of Charles Scribner and Maxwell Perkins as a challenge in creative autobiography before she was to begin another major critical book. She never did. Her last book would be biography: *Our Friend James Joyce* (1958), written with her husband Padraic Colum and published after her death.

It was in the convent school that Colum came to appreciate the value of a woman's friendship. There she found cooperative companionship in her fellow students and quickly grew to admire the education, the teaching ability, the dedication, and the loving care of the nuns of St. Louis. Writing *LD* in her early sixties, Colum said of the convent sisters: "The sum total of my impressions was of high-minded, devoted women who were often more than their own mothers to the little girls they trained and taught and brought up" (*LD*, 31). And Colum's longing for a life she had not chosen appears when she writes "that the newly received novice would, as a nun, lead a more contented, more placid, and perhaps a happier life than women in the world, I have very little doubt. She would never grow old-maidish or prim or dried up, as unmarried women, and even married women, in the world often do, for she would all her life have children and young girls around her to bring up and educate, and her rule of life would not allow her to spend much time thinking of herself" (*LD*, 38). Mary Colum had no children of her own.

One example of Colum's compassion in sisterhood was her attempt to help the troubled daughter of her and Padraic's good friends James and Nora Joyce. Lucia was troubled, in part, because she had fallen in love with her father's amanuensis, Samuel Beckett, and that love was not returned. Colum suggested marriage and Joyce followed through and arranged an engagement with a different man, but Lucia did not stabilize. Lucia came to live with Molly and Padraic; Molly brought in a psychiatrist and engaged herself in lengthy conversations with Lucia, but all her efforts were to no avail. Facing a serious operation herself, Colum had to

escort Lucia to a sanitarium from which she never emerged, and then devoted herself to comforting Joyce, who felt himself a failure as a father.

Colum's personal heroes were women. In *From These Roots* it is Madam de Staël. In *LD* there are two. Towards one, Lady Gregory, Colum had mixed feelings, for Lady Gregory had hurt her husband, while Molly and Padraic were on their honeymoon, by dropping his one-act play "Betrayal" from the Abbey schedule and substituting one of her own. Molly does not mention that the play, later world famous, was just too inflammatory, too anti-British for the time. But although Mary Colum did not like Lady Gregory's seeming haughtiness, she realized that without the aristocratic woman's support, energy, prestige, and wisdom, the Irish National Theatre Society would never have come into being or survived the egos of its fractious, contentious members.

But Colum's greatest heroine, her most admired woman, was not an artist but a political figure, Maud Gonne. Colum first saw her when attending the Abbey as a university student. Gonne walked in, accompanied by Yeats, and was hissed for having just divorced John MacBride. Colum says: "The woman stood and faced the hissers, her whole figure showing a lively emotion, and I saw the most beautiful, the most heroic-looking human being I have ever seen before or since. She was about six feet tall and of both romantic and commanding presence" (*LD*, 142). As a patriotic, literature-loving young woman, Colum identified with Gonne. Significantly, Gonne gave the beautiful red-haired Colum a special wedding present, a picture she had painted "of a red-haired woman going forth to battle, her shield in her hair, a flock of ravens around her head—some old warrior-queen, or perhaps the Irish war goddess, the Morrighu" (*LD*, 150). Gonne was connecting herself to the younger woman and both of them to a common ancestor and courageous role model. That painting became Colum's talisman. Even when old, matronly, and gray, she thought of herself as the fiery red-haired aristocratic Irish warrior-queen battling her enemies—ignorance, stupidity, anti-Irish prejudice, male patronizing, and domination—to the end.

Colum never stopped fighting. In a letter to Horace Gregory, written 15 January 1953, she complains of the tiresome lecturing of male literary celebrities like Carl Carmer, as she seeks allies in her attempt to obtain equal opportunities for women at the MacDowell Colony of which she was a corporate board member.⁷ On her own Mary Colum achieved a life

7. Horace Gregory Papers, Syracuse University Library.

of significance and she made a contribution to the economic, political, academic, and artistic liberation of women.

I never met Mary Colum. I did meet Padraic in 1964 at an awards ceremony of the Poetry Society of America, when he was eighty-three, a short, portly, partly-deaf, bald old man, jocular and very friendly to young poets like myself. My affection for Molly began when researching my bio-critical book on Padraic Colum, and, at SUNY Binghamton, I saw the photos of Molly that Padraic had left, along with their early courtship correspondence, with his other papers in the archives there. Her beauty as a very young woman, and the powerful image of her in the fierce-eyed, wild-haired, embattled beauty of her maturity moved me deeply. *From These Roots* and *Life and the Dream* conquered my mind.

A few years ago, when I was at the American Conference for Irish Studies in Dublin, I visited the Colums' plot at St. Fintona Cemetery, Sutton Co., Dublin. They are in the same grave. Molly, who died first, has the headstone, put up by Padraic; his small footstone lies at her feet. Somehow it seems appropriate. I go back to visit when I can.

Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Modern Language Association of America Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., December 1996, and at the Syracuse University English Department Colloquium, February 1997.